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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000160

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/24/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN DEMOCRACY LOOKING SHABBIER EVERY DAY

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: While most of Armenia gets on with life, a significant core of Yerevan's population -- especially the more educated -- remain bitterly unreconciled to the election outcome. And not without reason: while it is impossible to know how the election would have turned out if it had been even relatively clean and free of intimidation, it is clear that the authorities used every tool at their disposal to leave nothing to chance. Authorities worked assiduously to keep violations mostly out of the direct view of OSCE observers. Even so, the ODIHR head of mission confided that the joint international observer mission nearly issued a sub-standard grade of "partly in line" with democratic commitments. We understand that an early-March ODIHR interim report will probably be much tougher, focusing on the vote counts and recounts. While both government and opposition leaders have done a remarkable job so far of preventing direct clashes, we see increasing use of authoritarian tools to shut down the opposition's protest demonstrations. Septel will detail the various categories of election violations credibly reported. END SUMMARY

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TWO ARMENIAS: MAD AS HELL VS. BUSINESS AS USUAL  
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12. (C) 24-HOUR PROTESTS: Six days after Armenians went to the polls February 19, round-the-clock protests of Ter-Petrossian (LTP) supporters continue in Freedom Square. The rally shrinks to anywhere from 500 to two thousand during the coldest hours of the night, but usually has no less than about 10,000 during daylight hours, and swells to perhaps 35-45,000 for several hours every afternoon, beginning at 15:00, as LTP and his lieutenants address the crowds. LTP himself apparently is spending every night there. The afternoon crowds feature a surprisingly broad demographic cross-section of Yerevan. Most afternoons feature about a ten-block march of around 10-15,000 protesters around downtown Yerevan. Evenings at Freedom Square have a street fair atmosphere, as rally organizers play music and periodically light off fireworks to keep the crowd energized and entertained. However, with each passing day, the mood of the crowd grows more tense and less optimistic, as ralliers expect some sort of police crackdown to drive them from the square. Each of the past three nights featured slightly varying rumors that "tonight is the night!" and the uncertainty seems to be wearing on demonstrators' nerves. February 25, LTP dared authorities to arrest him, saying he is ready to be a martyr. He taunted that Gorbachev had been man enough to arrest him and his fellow Karabakh Committee members in 1988. Several supporters announced hunger strikes February 25.

13. (C) INTELLIGENTSIA UP IN ARMS: Many of post's everyday contacts -- mostly members of the Yerevan intelligentsia -- sympathize strongly with the LTP rallies, resenting what they consider the government's blatant manipulation of the outcome even if they may yet dislike LTP himself. Many such contacts are discontented with the West in general, and the United States in particular, for our perceived failure to hold Armenian authorities accountable. One particularly pointed example was a page-long tirade received from a university English professor, in response to a routine Public Affairs Section invitation for students to come to an embassy-sponsored movie screening. The previously mild-mannered professor, who clearly has had pro-American sentiments, lambasted us for betraying the principles of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr., for our failing to "support and encourage heroic women and men who do not leave Freedom Square for several days and nights in this cold weather fighting for democratic principles to win in Armenia."

14. (C) MEDIA BLACKOUT: Meanwhile, Armenia's other regions, as well as the less politically minded in Yerevan, remain indifferent and perhaps oblivious to the continuing political stand-off at Freedom Square. There has been a near-total information blackout in Armenian broadcast media about the ongoing protests. Local television stations do not cover the rallies. The local Armenian broadcaster of the French-produced, Russian-language "Euronews" news programming has taken to cutting into the Euronews broadcasts when Armenia is mentioned, after the program aired about a sixty-second piece on the Freedom Square rallies several days ago. The Armenia Liberty radio service of RFE/RL is providing news coverage of the protests. Anecdotal reports

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suggest that Armenians outside of Yerevan are mostly unaware of the demonstrations. Over the weekend, the dominant, state-run television channel, H1, alluded to the ongoing rally -- and seemingly prepared the ground for authorities to drive the protesters out -- by airing (seemingly specious) allegations that the 24-hour sit-in has become a hotbed of crime, alcoholism, and drugs, while unsanitary conditions, noise, and fireworks have made the gathering into a public nuisance for neighbors.

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PROTESTS, FIRINGS, AND ARRESTS  
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15. (C) OCTOBER 1999 PROSECUTOR, AND MP'S BREAK RANKS: Authorities have been embarrassed by the continuing trickle of anti-government opinion from within its ranks. Deputy Prosecutor General Gagik Jahangirian spoke February 22 at LTP's Freedom Square rally against the government's handling of the election and other grievances. He was promptly fired, as one would expect, and then arrested on ambiguous criminal charges, along with his brother and entourage. Jahangirian had been the lead prosecutor investigating the October 27, 1999, parliamentary assassinations. He has long been believed -- and strongly hinted at the LTP rally -- to have more information than has ever become public about who was responsible for planning those shootings. Jahangirian, along with his brother and assorted hangers-on, were arrested late Saturday, February 23, in a SWAT-team ambush that wounded the brother, as well as two police officers from the cross-fire of their fellow police. Post's RSO staff inquired with police late Saturday night to confirm that Jahangirian was indeed in police custody, and not the victim of an unlawful kidnapping, as initial reports suggested. Meanwhile, seven ruling coalition members of parliament spoke out February 22 against the election conduct, and announced their support for LTP.

16. (U) TWO HOVHANISSIANS, WHERE'S ARTUR?: The popular Heritage Party leader, Raffi Hovhanissian, lent his personal prestige to the LTP movement on February 22, speaking at the

Freedom Square rally to declare himself and his party "part of the people's movement." Raffi had been conspicuously absent from the scene since days before the February 19 election, and has also not made any public statement or appearance since his rally address. Also on February 25, Dashnak party presidential candidate Vahan Hovhanissian resigned his post as deputy speaker of the National Assembly. Vahan once again criticized both the current government and the previous LTP government, and put himself forward as a mediator between the two sides. The Dashnaks are widely expected to announce the resignations of three cabinet ministers from government, but apparently are still deliberating internally about that possibility. Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law) party campaign manager and senior MP Heghine Bisharyan spoke at LTP's rally on February 21, supporting LTP's contention that the elections were fraudulent, but stopping short of joining forces. Artur Baghdassarian reportedly will make a statement February 25 clarifying his party's position.

16. (C) DIPLOMAT DEFECTIONS: On February 22, Deputy Foreign Minister Armen Baiburtian issued a joint statement with three other senior Armenian diplomats, criticizing the conduct of the election. Baiburtian's co-signers were the Armenian ambassadors to Kazakhstan and Italy, as well as the DCM in Ukraine. All four were promptly fired by Presidenti Kocharian. Over the weekend, six more MFA diplomats aligned themselves with the Baiburtian statement, and were also promptly fired by FM Oskanian. The most notable of these was MFA press spokesman Vladimir Karapetian, while of most direct relevance to us were the directors of the USA/Canada and NATO divisions. MFA Americas Department director Armen Yeganian detailed for us over the phone these diplomats' various personal ties to the LTP camp -- Baiburtian, for example, was an adviser on LTP's presidential staff. (COMMENT: Nonetheless, the mass defection from government service is striking, as none of these diplomats seem like wild-eyed activists, nor do they appear to have anything to gain from joining what looks to be LTP's losing cause. Each had served loyally in very responsible positions over the last ten years of the Kocharian government. Their current decision to bolt -- though perhaps handled with questionable professionalism -- looks like an act of conscience, arising from their belief that the elections were rigged. END COMMENT.)

17. (C) ROUNDING UP THE OPPOSITION: In recent days, Police

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and the National Security Service have started arresting pro-LTP politicians, on questionable grounds. New Times party leader Aram Karapetian, senior Republic Party official Smbat Ayyazian, and leader of the tiny Democratic Fatherland party Petros Makeyan, were all arrested in separate incidents over three days. Pro-LTP oligarch/MP Khachatur "Grzo" Sukiasian's motorcade was stopped by police. Post inquired with MFA, police, and prosecutors' service seeking details of the charges under which these politicians are being held, but no clear information was available. Karapetian was under 72 hour "national security" detention without formal charges, while specific charges have not been published for the others. All are reportedly being held without access to legal counsel, as is Jahangirian, according to local media and one of our regular human rights NGO contacts.

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INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS' VIEWS  
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18. (C) OSCE CODE-SPEAK: The British Ambassador told CDA that the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission head, Ambassador Geer Ahrens, had confided that the combined International Election Observation Mission (which included three parliamentary delegations in addition to the ODIHR team), had come very close to deciding to rate Armenia's election only "partly in line" with international commitments, which in ODIHR code language is understood by insiders to be a significantly

failing grade. Instead, the heterogeneous mission finally settled on "mostly in line." The ODIHR Election Observation Mission has told us it will produce another interim report in early March, which is likely to be more critical than the joint preliminary statement.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) Until recently, authorities had handled the post-election situation relatively well, having assiduously avoided confrontation with the protesters, and proceeding with the re-counts. In recent days, however, the government looks more and more impatient to end the demonstrations, and seem to be playing from a more authoritarian playbook to ratchet up pressure. Meanwhile, the more information that comes to light about election day and the conduct of the re-counts, the worse Armenia's performance looks.

PENNINGTON